forest

yan wang preston

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HATJE CANTZ

Pao Yue-kong Library
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Foreword

Through compelling imagery, the Syngenta Photography Award has drawn attention to, and stimulated dialogue around, key global challenges. It has offered photographers an international platform for their work and provided them with the opportunity to explore issues of global significance.

The Syngenta Photography Award has two parts. The Professional Commission invites professional photographers to submit a series of images and a commission proposal for a project related to the theme, while the Open Competition invites submissions from both professional and amateur photographers.

Yan Wang Preston won the third Professional Commission of the Syngenta Photography Award, and this book is a result of that partnership.

THE SYNGENTA PHOTOGRAPHY AWARD
EXPLORING GLOBAL CHALLENGES

Can't See the Wood for the Trees

Zelda Cheatle

> Art and nature are siblings,
> branches of the one tree; and
> nowhere more than in the con-
> tinuing inexplicability of
> many of their processes, and
> above all those of creation
> and of effect on their respective
> audiences.
>
> **John Fowles, *The Tree,* 1979**

Photography emerged in the 1840s and photographers immediately saw trees, landscapes, and nature as sources of imagery. Touching wood, knocking on wood for luck, and trees and their woods are integral parts of most lives. The Tree of Life is known as a universal symbol, and across the globe the passing of a tree through its season marks the passing of time.

As early as 1843, Anna Atkins's observations illustrated the book *Photographs of British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions.* This was probably, significantly, the first photo-illustrated book. Around the same time, Lady Clementina Hawarden began experimenting with stereoscopic landscapes. Her portraits of trees and her connection to nature were recorded photographically as early as 1853. In 1899, Sarah Angelina Acland, many years ahead of her time, pioneered the creation of colour photographs. Her photograph *The Avenue of Poinsettias, Funchal, Madeira, 1909,* now held in the Bodleian Library, is vibrant and vividly red. Many years later, Yan Wang Preston would use the same vivid red in her Chinese landscapes.

For these pioneers of photography, the tree, to greater and lesser extents, was a source of inspiration and pleasure. In 2010, Preston began to photograph the transplanted mature trees in China's new cities. However, what initially fuelled her was not pleasure but pain. It was these trees' bandaged limbs with blood-like paint that prompted her to take out her large-format camera. Later, she followed the devastating process of a 300-year-old tree, Frank, being torn, wrenched, and disgorged from its home in a traditional village to be transplanted in the construction site of a five-star hotel. This act occurs across China.

Qualified as an anaesthetist in China, and later gaining a PhD in photography from the University of Plymouth, Preston combines aesthetic skill, a scientific background, and the sensitivity of both a subjective and objective viewer of her native land. Her first tree pictures are as combative as a battlefield. Their brutality bears a strong resemblance to Paul Nash's *The Menin Road.* At the same time, their cool colour combination of grey and green resonates with the Chinese tradition of bonsai art, which Preston is familiar with.

After some time in the city, Preston's feelings changed. Not fuelled by fury anymore, she developed empathy for the city dweller. With the need for relief from concrete, the haven that trees provide—the greenery, the brush with nature, the single life-giving aspect in an

urban environment—began to mollify Preston. Her pictures began to tell their own story. A story of humanity.

The tree can be seen as a metaphor for migration. Chongqing, where Preston has photographed over many years, has a population of nearly thirty million and continues to grow exponentially. This expanding metropolis echoes the trend of global migration, where millions of rural workers move to cities. It is estimated that half of the world's new cities in 2030 have not yet been built. In this migratory process, trees and people experience the same trauma of leaving a familiar land and a familiar life more in tune with nature. But new life does provide new opportunities. Like the rural dwellers that migrated to the city, some of the transplanted trees do adapt and grow.

In her first major project, *Mother River,* Preston took a conceptual view of China by charting the entire 6,211-kilometre Yangtze River, taking pictures at precise 100-kilometre intervals. In *Forest,* however, Preston invested in time instead of epic physical journeys. The earliest picture in the series was taken in 2010 and the last ones in 2017. Many trees and areas were repeatedly visited. In the ever-changing city, time itself still holds a certain objectivity. The photographer's job is to reveal and reflect upon the changes. Preston calls herself a 'tree spotter.' In the jungle-like city, she 'spotted' the new trees and looked for signs of their history: the nails, the scars, and the grown-around ropes. The history of these trees tells the history of the new city. It is a history well hidden—its politics easily forgotten—in the disguise of trees.

Fatefully, on a return journey from photographing Frank, or rather his original bare standing place, Preston discovered a different phenomenon that made her rethink her journey and purpose—the landscape of *ecology recovery.* To echo the scale and highlight the questionable processes, Preston made use of the blood red of the transplanted earth, the earth sprayed onto newly contoured ground. She also took up the almost fluorescent green of the entirely manmade netting, which is used to keep the newly transplanted red earth in place. In this context, even the blue sky seems devoid of its natural purpose. Strangely, this particular mixture of red and green is a traditional Taoist colour combination. The red symbolises *yang* energy while the green symbolises *yin* energy. When conventionally paired together, they are expected to induce harmony. But while the future outcome of this new land is yet to be known, there seems little harmony in this utopian dream of ecology recovery.

Preston's photographs are bold, her feelings are powerful. She began with trees and has in the end encompassed the land itself. Through these pictures, Preston has raised the consciousness of urgent questions faced by all of us in this era of urbanism. In doing so, she joins the ranks of exceptionally dedicated photographers and artists who have looked, asked questions with care, and responded with their hearts.

> Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language.... And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now.

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet,* 1929

Second Nature
Nadine Barth

The trees are mirrored, motionless, in the water, their crowns swathed in protective green sheaths that push upwards in jaunty counterpoint to the blue sky beyond; in the background mountains rise gently upwards, and the still, symmetrical reflection on the water starts to ripple slightly: a moment for contemplation, a picture of beauty. Set in the middle of a row of six other trees that almost look gift-wrapped, a single tree displays its crown, although its trunk is wrapped in a pressure stocking of many layers of plastic film. Stakes on all sides support the tree, which bends slightly to the right: an attempt to straighten it by what at second glance we see as a forcible intervention. Now it becomes clear that the tree has been transplanted and is destined to be a decorative feature of the Haidong North Mountain Forest Park.

Yan Wang Preston chooses a symmetrical composition for the picture and reaches out to the viewer for an aesthetic reaction. Yet at the same time she unmasks that striving for symmetry and straightness that all too often drives mankind to meddle with nature's own talents.

We can see a similar approach in a shot taken in the Dali Sunshine Property Development Area. Two trees, the smaller on the left, the larger on the right, form pillars standing in front of strips of green netting through which one can see an artfully constructed rubble wall built from large stones. Another similar wall runs along in front of the trees, and the whole scheme may turn out to be some sort of promenade; the shape of the foreground wall hints at the possibility of steps behind. But the work has not yet got that far, as we can also see from the shadows of the leaves, whose density outdoes the actual leaves, and in the larger tree even mingle into the crown itself. This is a picture where composition is subordinated to the charm of pattern and to materials that look tangible, but then plays this off against the irritation aroused by being able to detect the cables that shackle one of the trunks.

Plainly, supports are needed when planting new trees, but Preston makes us ponder our personal interpretation of the relationship between developing new sites and our need of the natural world. We stride in our best designer/creator mode along sweeping avenues of gingko trees newly firmed into the earth of a building site, we pick our way among tree-monuments rendered ghostly by their shrouds of translucent material and wait, with Preston, for the amputation of boughs that, come the spring, will turn them into stubby, scarecrow-like remnants of trees. And then, looking at the before and after photos, we are pleased at the contrast of the withered saplings in Chongqing's University City in 2011 with the seemingly paradisal lush green on show when the photographer revisited the site in 2017.

What we have before us initially is classical landscape photography with an element of social relevance, squarely therefore in the

tradition of, amongst others, Robert Frank, who documented the clear-felling of American forests—including the sad fate of age-old trees that, unlike Preston's case of 'Frank,' were not destined to be promised a second life but were uprooted forthwith on the spot. However, we also find ourselves within the frame of reference of the topographer, who coolly seeks to work out the differences between things that are apparently identical. Yan Wang Preston has taken newly planted and artificially transplanted trees in China as the object of her examination—her case study—but she treats them with a certain playfulness and freedom. Where Thomas Struth, say, might present us with static rows seen from the same perspective (*New Pictures from Paradise*), Preston works more freely, changing viewpoint, distance, message. She is subtle and poetic.

As the photographer takes us by the hand and leads us through the land that she and her rigorous gaze have opened up, we end up trustingly following her even into the metropolis of Chongqing, over the multi-lane motorway bridges into the biotopes of deliberately unmanaged natural growth and of meticulously choreographed green-area projects that present an interesting counterpoint to grey and massive steel and concrete. Suddenly, up pops the odd human, then crowds of them, and one realises that it is they for whose benefit all the effort and expense have been undertaken: the transplanting of trees was for them, their recreation, their sensibilities, their lungs. And so the ultimate consumer, one of the megacity's many million inhabitants (here Chongqing can stand for all megacities and for the future humanity is destined to spend in them), that human being finds themselves still surrounded by skyscrapers and shopping centres, superhighways and motorway bridges, experiencing the green of nature as nothing more than an artificial add-on area, degenerated into decorativeness, whose existence they accept as a matter of course without really thinking about it. Their lack of interest, yoked to the isolation of transplanted trees amid the concrete's crushing might: this is a feeling that smoulders in every image of a city. Yan Wang Preston plays with the contrasts in masterly fashion. She creates an effect both daring and sensual: in her composition of a park lying below intersecting aerial motorways that fill the whole picture and seem to press powerfully downwards, a delicate, threatened, slender group of fluffy trees huddle together in the centre of the shot, flanked by two office towers with plenty of white sky above. And her shot of children hopping among the water jets of fountains in Jiulong Square, by concentrating on the wet paving stones in the foreground, creates an interesting contrast with the rich green of the three trees standing behind the scurrying figures, with the city's skyline simmering on the horizon beyond.

A shot of bright orange-coloured plastic trees with young girls taking selfies in front of them may be perceived in the nature of a humorous nod and wink from the photographer. But it is something else as well: a sign of a growing inclination towards a 'second' nature, one that is optional—usable and disposable—and could perhaps serve as the background for a poster, while the 'first' nature is increasingly disregarded. Yan Wang Preston's *Forest* warns us against this with compassion and powerful imagery.

To the South of the Colourful Clouds

Ecology Model Town, Haidong Development Zone, Dali, Yunnan Province

Roadside trees, 2017

Roadside Ecology Recovery Project, 2017

Roadside Ecology Recovery Project, 2017

Haidong Development Zone, 2017

Haidong North Mountain Forest Park construction site, 2017

Roadside Ecology Recovery and Landscaping Project, 2017

In Haidong, urbanisation and ecology recovery are designed to occur simultaneously. With both processes, red soil plays an important role. The soil is a semi-artificial mixture. Its base, the dark red earth, is a natural substance purchased from elsewhere in quantities measured in mountains. This soil is chosen because it is sticky, fine, without stones, and unfertilised. Artificial agents are added to the soil, making it more sticky, porous, fertile, and able to hold more water. Grass seeds are then added into the mixture.

During application, water is added to the mixture to form a mud-like material, which is sprayed onto steeper areas with a large hose until the mud reaches thirty centimetres deep. Such areas include closed quarries and construction sites. For flatter areas, the soil is simply laid out as the base for all types of newly introduced plants, including trees.

To stabilise the mountain surface with its new topsoil, a whole support system is put into place, which includes concrete frames, sand bags, and metal mesh. Irrigation technology imported from Israel is introduced to some sites, while other areas require manual watering with water brought in from elsewhere. Many sites require watering twice a day for at least three years before they can become established.

Yunlang Quarry Ecology Recovery Project, 2017

Yunlang Quarry Ecology Recovery Project, 2017

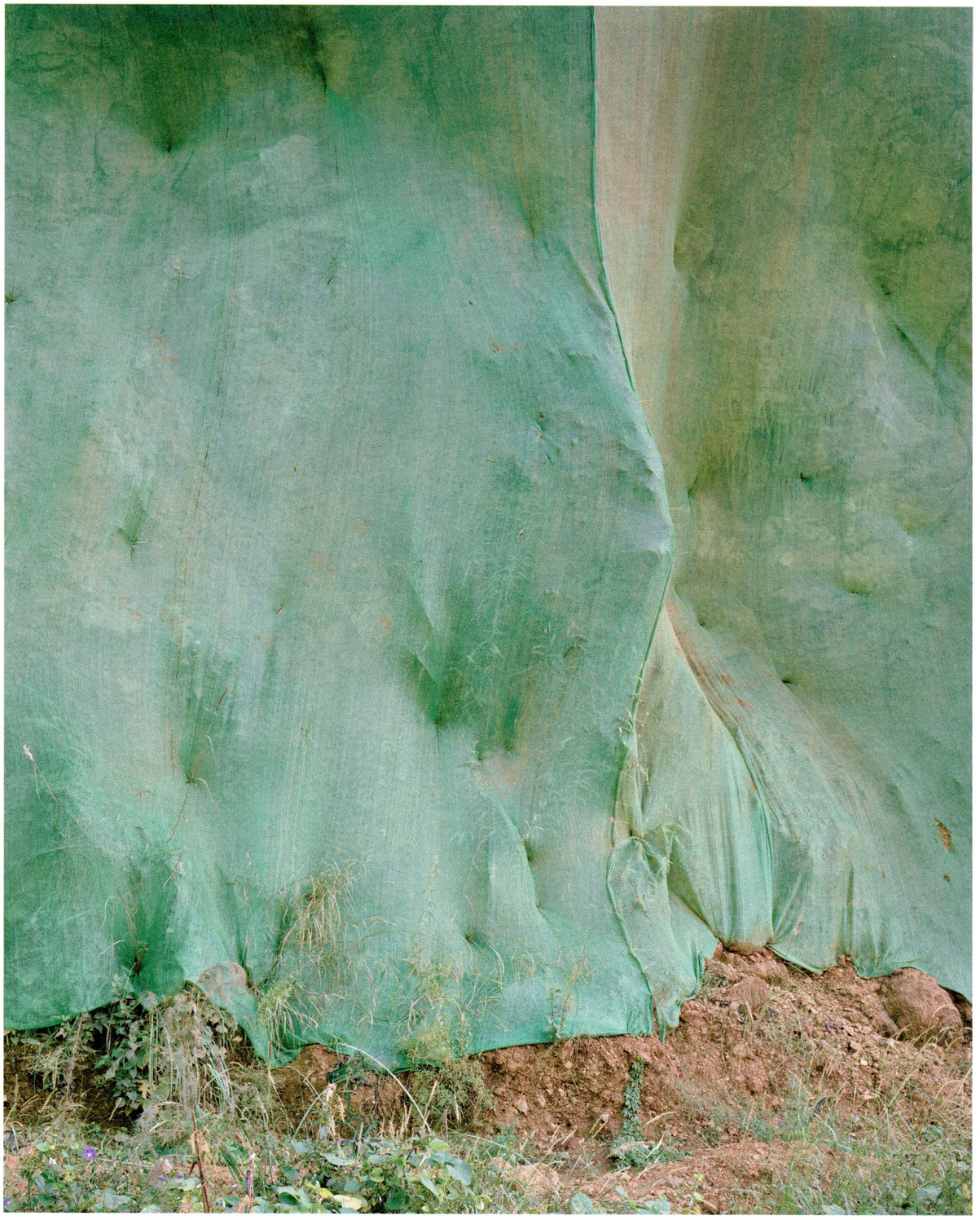
Yunlang Quarry Ecology Recovery Project, 2017

Yunlang Quarry Ecology Recovery Project, 2017

Puhejing Quarry Ecology Recovery Project, 2017

Puhejing Quarry Ecology Recovery Project, 2017

Puhejing Quarry Ecology Recovery Project, 2017



Puhejing Quarry Ecology Recovery Project, 2017

Dali Sunshine Property Development Area, 2017

Haidong North Mountain Forest Park construction site, 2017

There are two types of green netting used in Dali.

One is the non-biodegradable plastic netting that is used to cover anything unappealing to the eye, for example, construction waste and untreated quarry faces. In this manner, the user's objective is to be 'green'—as long as it is visually green, it can be seen as being 'environmentally friendly.' Many of the newly planted trees also have their crowns covered in this green plastic during winter to keep them warm.

The other type is said to be biodegradable. This type is used to protect the newly applied red soil until grass can establish itself in it. During this process, the netting slowly breaks into small pieces, forming clouds of confetti that eventually disappear in the wind.

Roadside Ecology Recovery and Landscaping Project, 2017

Haidong North Mountain Forest Park construction site, 2017

Haidong North Mountain Forest Park construction site, 2017

Frank

March 2013:
Frank, a 300-year-old daqing tree (*Ficus hookeriana* Corner), was still standing at its home—the tiny village of Xialiu at the southeast corner of Lijiang Prefecture, an area with a reputation akin to Shangri-La. Ludila, one of the Yangtze River dams, was soon to flood the village. Everything had to move.

June 2013:
The entire Xialiu village had been flattened. No trace was left. Frank and three other centuries-old trees in the village were sold together for RMB 100,000 (€10,000). Each family received a small share. Frank was bought by the owners of a planned five-star hotel, Hot Spring Hotel, in a nearby county called Binchuan in Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture. Construction for the hotel had not yet begun. According to the only security guard on site at the time, Frank, after having its crown and leaves removed, still weighed seventy tons. It broke two cranes before finally getting uprooted from its home of 300 years. It was so big that it could not be transported around city street corners. The local police had to coordinate the move. By the time it reached the hotel, it had cost the new owners RMB 250,000 (€25,000). Someone else made an offer of RMB 700,000 (€70,000), but it was declined. When asked if the tree would survive, the guard replied with pride, 'Yes. They were all experts for transplanting trees, it will most definitely survive.'

November 2017:
The Hot Spring Hotel's foundation had finally been laid. But Frank was nowhere to be seen. It had died two years before. Only the mound of red soil that it once stood in remained. Apparently, after Frank, another tree was purchased and planted on the same spot, but it also died. Judging by the fates of these old trees, the feng shui of this place was seriously in doubt, as the locals said.

Frank, March 2013

Frank, June 2013

Frank, November 2017

The City of Double Celebrations
Forest City, Chongqing

Central Park, University City, 2011

University City, 2011

Yangtze Riverside Road, 2011

University City, 2011

Longan woodland, University City, 2011

Longan woodland, University City, 2017

Since the 'forest city' policy began in 2008, ginkgo trees have become Chongqing's preferred tree for transplantation. However, the purchase and introduction of many thousands of mature ginkgoes sparked controversy. The origin and cost of these trees are questionable. Typically a northern tree, they require intensive care in order to survive. Their small crown provides little shade, and their leaves fall each winter, leaving an unpleasant barren tree. In contrast, Chongqing's city tree, huangjue, is extremely versatile, an evergreen with a large crown that provides much needed shade in the southern city's punishing summer.

In order to give way to the transplanted ginkgoes, Chongqing's many established city trees were purposely removed. With their rocketing prices, ginkgoes were planted at conspicuous locations, such as on the sides of important roads and new property development areas. The more expensive and important the area is, the larger and older the transplanted trees are. Often they are even wrapped in elevating gold fabric. When winter comes, plastic leaves are put on as decorations to improve their image.

Ginkgo trees with plastic leaves, 2011

Wushan New Town, 2010

View from Egongyan Bridge, 2011

Swimming pool underneath Egongyan Bridge, 2012

Wushan New Town, 2014

Egongyan Park, 2014

Vienna Hotel, 2017

Jiangbeizui Central Business District, 2017

Jiangbeizui Central Business District, 2017

Camphor tree woodland, University City, 2011

Camphor tree woodland, University City, 2017

Woodland overlooking Caiyuanba Bridge, 2017

One year ago, around fifteen young trees, a flower tree, and some water pipes were bandaged together around a metal pole. They were planted in the courtyard of a four-star hotel that desired aged trees but did not want to pay for them. Gold fabric was wrapped around the new conglomerate to give it a deceptively old look. If everything goes well, in another two years' time, the roots of these young trees will join together and they will become one tree, Goldie. And it will look big, old, and grand.

Goldie, 2017

View from Egongyan Bridge, 2017

Egongyan Park, 2017

Jiulong Square, 2017

Yangjiaping Shopping District, 2017

Lianglukou Subway Station, 2017

Tram station, University City, 2017

Plastic trees at the Liberation Monument Shopping District, 2017

Guanyinqiao Shopping District, 2017

Guanyinqiao Shopping District, 2017

Roadside camphor tree, 2017

In 2016, Typhoon Meranti uprooted over 300,000 trees in the southern city of Xiamen in Guangdong Province. They were all newly planted trees without established roots.

In Chongqing, construction of the Two Rivers Happiness Square was completed in 2011. Its 365 transplanted mature ginkgo trees symbolise good wishes for every day of the year. To prevent them from falling during strong winds, they were connected to each other with a network of metal wires. This method seems to have helped, since most of the trees are still there after seven years. Some have even borne fruit. Only a few have died and left unpleasant gaps in the row of parterres.

Ginkgo trees supported by metal wire, Two Rivers Happiness Square, 2017

One of the community activity areas inside a thirty-floor apartment complex, 2017

One of the community activity areas inside a thirty-floor apartment complex, 2017

Courtyard of an apartment complex near Caiyuanba Bridge, 2017

Near Caiyuanba Bridge, 2017

Garden underneath Caiyuanba Bridge, 2017

Allotments under Caiyuanba Bridge, 2017

Huangjue tree with a wall trapped inside its roots, University City, 2017

Rongqiao Park, 2017

University City, 2017

Central Park, University City, 2017

Property prices rise sharply with the percentage increase of green areas. Many property developers in Chongqing have actively adopted the 'green' idea as one of their main selling points. Some have even built large-scale parks, such as Rongqiao Park, and handed them over to the local authority for management. Old trees are transplanted in large quantities to give the new parks a ready-made 'mature' look.

Rongqiao Park, 2017

Central Park, University City, 2017

Photographer's Note

About Dali and Chongqing:
The ancient city of Dali is one of the most popular tourist cities in Yunnan Province, attracting millions each year with its beautiful Erhai Lake, Cangshan Mountain, blue sky, clean air, and its rich ethnic cultures. (The name 'Yunnan' means 'to the south of the colourful clouds.') Since the old town and most areas to the west of Erhai Lake have reached their development potential, from 2012 Dali began to urbanise Haidong as its new Development Zone. Measuring 53.89 square kilometres, Haidong is located on the east side of Erhai Lake. Traditionally, this is the worst area in Dali in terms of agricultural productivity, as it suffers from the burning afternoon sun, a lack of water, and poor soil quality. However, its hilly geology lends itself to the structure of a modern mountain town.

The vision for Haidong is for it to be built as an example of a 'scientific development, ecological town, and international leisure town.' The original rural and natural landscapes are to be replaced with high-class tourists resorts, properties for outside investors, and parks. Due to their lack of 'aesthetic quality,' all of the original mountains in Haidong were re-landscaped, with their topsoil replaced by the red semi-artificial soil. 'Ecology recovery' is applied on all construction sites by way of covering the stripped earth with new soil and plants, including potted plants. Very few people live here yet. Despite its numerous new properties, Haidong is still a 'ghost town.'

Chongqing, on the contrary, houses nearly 30 million people in an area of over 80,000 square kilometres. (The name 'Chongqing' means 'double celebrations.') As the gateway to China's vast west, Chongqing was made into a municipal city in 1997. Since then, the city has entered a new phase of rapid urban renewal, urban expansion, and industrialisation. In 2008, the Chongqing government advocated the policy of building a 'forest city,' which led to an intense period of planting and transplanting trees. Although this policy is no longer in place, the practice has continued.

Dali and Chongqing are by no means isolated cities in China in terms of trying to be 'green.' I concentrated on them as case studies. The physical connection between them is Frank, who was moved from its hometown to a county in Dali. It was during my trip to revisit Frank that I discovered Dali's ecology recovery landscape.

What Trees are Transplanted?
In Chongqing, ginkgo trees *(Ginkgo biloba)* are the most popular, while Chinese banyan trees *(Ficus microcarpa)* and huangjue trees *(Ficus virens)* are also often seen. Occasionally very old longan trees *(Dimocarpus longan)* and sweet osmanthuses *(Osmanthus fragrans)* are transplanted in Chongqing.

In Dali, where the climate is drastically different (much drier, cooler, and sunnier), daqing trees (*Ficus hookeriana* Corner) are a common sight. Other trees like pines, sycamore trees, and banyan trees are also popular.

Camphor trees are among the favourites in both cities.

How Old are the Transplanted Trees?
Frank was 300 years old, the oldest tree that I found and photographed. The oldest ginkgo tree transplanted in Chongqing was over 100 years old. It died a few years ago. Many centuries-old huangjue trees are transplanted in Chongqing's new urban areas. But the majority of the transplanted trees are between 30 to 100 years old.

Where Do the Old Trees Come From?
It is clear that many large trees come from garden centres and nurseries, where they have been given abundant water, fertiliser, and sunlight to grow rapidly. Older trees have been 'rescued' or 'recycled' due to China's recent landscape transformation, where villages and older towns were flattened to give way to new construction. Everything, including trees, has to be moved. Sometimes tree dealers source mature trees from villages (that are not to be demolished) and offer to buy them. Finally, it is inevitable that some trees have been stolen illegally from the mountains or wherever they used to grow. But I have not attempted to investigate such supply channels in depth.

Will the Trees Survive?
The survival of transplanted trees depends on many aspects, including their history, the handling of the move, the condition of the new destination, and the care they receive after the move. Trees bred and grown in garden centres tend to do better because their root development has been constrained in a small pot-like area, making them easy to move. They are also traded often, meaning they are resilient to changing environments. Old, naturally grown trees suffer. Their roots are so spread out that it is impossible to move enough of them with the tree. They are also so well-moulded to their original climate that they find it difficult to adapt. It is often difficult to know whether a transplanted tree has survived before several years have passed. The long-term wellbeing of these trees is also regularly in question, even if they initially survive the move.

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For Neil and Lily

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